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Civic protest before and after Iceland's economic crisis: Adolescents speak about participation

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Abstract

In promoting children's and youths' citizenship awareness it is important to understand how they make meaning of human rights and citizenship education. Though important surveys have been conducted on the civic attitudes e.g., trust in governmental-related institutions) and civic engagement (Torney-Purta, 2002) of young people, few have used in-depth interviews to ask them how they make meaning of the influence they themselves have and can have in their community as responsible citizens, and how they view the citizenship education they are receiving. In the proposed presentation we will report on a case study that focuses on adolescents' ideas of participatory rights civic understanding), the influences they think they have and would like to have in their community (civic personal meaning), and their activities (civic participation), as well as how they feel school education supports their civic understanding and participation.

Anna, aged 16: 'If people know more about what is happening and what they can do to have an influence, then I think that we would have a society that is better for everyone'.

Magnus, aged 16: 'You should have the possibility to have [an influence] even though you don't use it. It's freedom; to have this open, open doors so you can express you yourself'.

Introduction

For the last two or three decades within democratic societies the call to strengthen democratic values and systems through education has been increasing (e.g. European Union, 2009). In promoting the civic awareness and engagement of children and adolescents it is important to understand how they make meaning of civic participation.

Civic awareness in a democratic society refers to individual and collective understanding of what it means to be a citizen, with the rights, obligations and responsibilities people have as citizens. Until relatively recently literature on civic participation focused solely on behaviours that affect political decisions, for example voting and joining a political party. Today the definition of civic participation has broadened to also include direct involvement in public life, for example through community service, volunteer service, and political activities that are not necessarily related to specific political parties (Kubow, Grossman, and Ninomiya, 2000).

A challenging question for educators is how to best enhance young people's civic awareness and engagement. Those of us who work within the constructivist tradition (Dewey, 1944) find it important to place the child, the adolescent in the centre. This child-centred approach means that as we work with young people in promoting their civic awareness and engagement we find it important to understand how they make meaning of democratic systems and values and related issues on human rights as well as civic participation. More precisely, as we base our work with young people on their values and ideas, and thoughts and feelings about civic engagement, it is essential to understand their perspectives by listening to their voices (Adalbjarnardottir, 2007, 2008; Flanagan and Faison, 2001).

In this paper we report on a case study that focuses on adolescents' understanding of participatory rights, their values and civic participation in their community.

Background

Over the past few decades research on young people's civic awareness and engagement has changed in line with societal changes (Torney-Purta and Amadeo, 2003). In the years from 1950 to 1975 research on civic participation focused on political activity, such as voting and participating in peaceful protests. Very few studies in this area were carried out between 1975 and 1990 but for the last two decades research on civic engagement has flourished in both Europe and the US with a broader focus than before. Studies have focused on young people's knowledge and understanding of the concept of democracy (Flanagan, Galloway, Gill, Galloway and Nti, 2005); their conceptual knowledge of the system of governance and social institutions (Torney-Purta and Amadeo, 2003); their attitudes towards their society (Flanagan, Bowes, Jonsson, Csapo and Sheblanova, 1998); and, whether they think of themselves as active participants in their society (Flanagan and Faison, 2001).

Among the findings on civic participation, people's sense of their political efficacy and their attitudes towards civic obligations seem to relate to whether or not they try to have an influence on society (Kinder, 1998). As Levinson (2007) argues, people are unlikely to try to change something in society if they do not believe their actions could make a difference. In this context, a person's sense of responsibility towards the society is important. Verba, Scholzman and Brady (1995) have found that many of those who take an active part in responding to social issues do so because they believe it to be their duty as citizens.

In a large international study (Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald and Schulz, 2001) that focused on intended civic participation, the majority of 14-year-old adolescents did not intend to take part in conventional political actions like writing to newspapers about political and social issues, joining a political party, or running for local or city offices. Voting was the only conventional political activity that the majority of the students intended to participate in (from 55% in Switzerland to 95% in Cyprus). Across all these activities gender differences varied between countries, with the exception that in most countries females were more likely to intend to participate in collecting money for a social cause and in all but ten countries out of 28 males were more interested in politics than females.

Furthermore, more young people characterize a good citizen as participating in social movements than in conventional civic activities (Torney-Purta et al., 2001). This is in line with findings from Haste and Hogan (2006), whose study in Britain indicated that social issues matter to young people. About 75 percent claimed that they would like to have an influence on the government regarding health care, better facilities for young people in society, controlling drugs and crime, and decreasing racism. More than two-thirds also wanted to have an influence on environmental issues and opportunities for women.

Although these and other important surveys have focused on young people's civic awareness and engagement, few have used in-depth interviews in exploring how they understand and make meaning of their civic knowledge, civic values, and civic participation (Taylor, Smith, and Gollop, 2008). One example of such a task is to explore their perspectives on the influence people, including themselves, can have on their community. Using such an approach contributes to an understanding of young people's civic identity; it helps us understand their perspectives on both their own and others' role as citizens of a democratic society. This is the aim of our case study.

The focus of our study is two adolescents' perspectives on civic participation both before and after the economic collapse in Iceland in October 2008 with special attention to civic protests. We also ask whether and why (or why not) they participated in the public protests that took place after the collapse, and whether they think that the influence that the public and young people, including themselves, can have on society has changed since the collapse, and if so how and why. The study is a part of our larger research project, on young people's civic awareness and engagement in a democratic society.

A Model: Civic Awareness and Engagement

In analysing young people's civic awareness and engagement we use a model which has a three-part focus (Adalbjarnardottir, 2007, 2008). First, the model looks at young people's knowledge and understanding of democratic systems. Importantly, we explore not only facts—what young people know—but also their understanding of these facts. For example, what does democracy or having an influence mean to them? Do they feel the public has a say; does the public have an influence on things in the society? Why is that important, or not? Second, we focus on their own values, beliefs, and attitudes. These values can be ethical in nature, such as respect, care, trust, equality, and solidarity. Third, we focus on their agency and participation or action: how they see themselves as actors in their society. For

example, do they want to have a say? Do they feel they have a say? How can they have an influence in their community and what do they do to have an influence, and why?

These constructs of knowledge/understanding, value beliefs/attitudes, and agency/action are illustrated in Figure 1. As the figure shows, these constructs become integrated into the person's civic awareness and engagement. Within and across these constructs or issues we thematically analyse the young people's perspectives and concerns (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998).

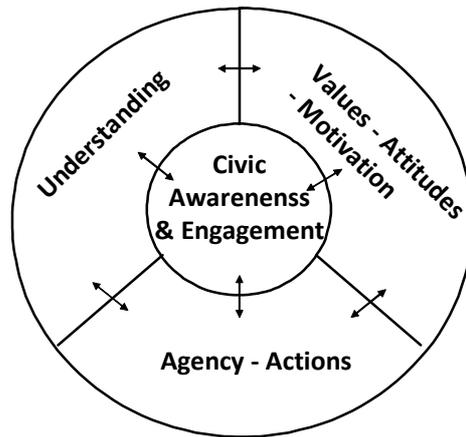


Figure 1. Young peoples' Civic Awareness and Engagement (adapted from Adalbjarnardottir, 2007, 2008).

The Case Study

Anna and Magnus, both aged 16, had just finished compulsory primary/lower secondary school (grades 1-10) when we first interviewed them in July 2008. In the Autumn they both started upper-secondary school or gymnasium (age 16-20). We interviewed them again seven months later in February 2009, after the economic collapse of October 2008. They were interviewed individually using an in-depth interview technique (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998). The interviews were transcribed and then analysed thematically.

Both Anna and Magnus are very active beyond their academic studies. For several years, Anna has studied music, and has been active in sports, both playing and coaching. Within her primary/lower secondary school she took part in several activities such as publishing the school yearbook, helping direct the school play, and taking the initiative on organising several events. In upper-secondary school she is already on a team that competes academically with other schools. While Magnus was in primary/lower-secondary school he was on the student council and as a board member he organized many events within the school. Also, in his community he has been on the board of the youth council, making many suggestions to the City of Reykjavik on things that could be improved in the community. We can say that Anna's activity is more social but Magnus's more political.

Below we explore both adolescents' civic awareness and engagement before and after Iceland's economic crisis. We focus on their views on public influences in the society and public protests. We explore their values, whether and why/not they participated in the protests after the collapse, and whether they think that the influence on society of the public and of young people, including them personally, has changed.

Anna

Anna felt that people, all social groups in the society, should have the right and opportunity to express their opinions: 'If all of us express what we think, our society becomes better ... If all people listen to each other, it will be good for every person not only for one'. People should participate in elections and if they need to protest to be heard they should do so. Here she provided an example from France about how effective public protests can be (first interview, summer 2008). Above, we notice not only her view

that people have the right to express their opinions but also how people's various perspectives can benefit both individuals and the society.

Anna emphasised individualistic and collective values such as freedom, justice, equal rights, and fairness: freedom to choose, to have an influence and do what one prefers; justice as reflected in equal rights for all groups in the society and the importance of people to be fair and just; and equality. For example, she said, 'the power should not only be in the hands of white middle aged men'. She expressed similar values in both interviews. However, after the economic collapse, we observed an even stronger democratic voice in her expressions of people's rights to express their opinions.

Anna wanted to have an influence. Already in the first interview she said in this regard: 'The society shapes me and I want to shape it back'. She also said she could imagine becoming a 'parliament woman' in the future to fight for the rights of people who have little influence in society and in that way to improve the society. She added: 'I feel that some people's perspectives are lacking and I just want life in this country to be good for everyone. I have a certain national pride and I just want to do good things for Iceland'. Here we see that she expresses a future-oriented political activity.

When we asked Anna before the crisis whether she would participate in civic protests she said: 'If there's something that I think is very important, then yes ... because I think it could have an influence'. However, it had to be about something that was very important to her personally.

Anna did not participate in the public protests that started in October. The reason she gave was that the situation did not touch her personally that much: 'If it was something that had influenced me more, then I would have participated, without a doubt'. Another reason was that she felt she needed more information and knowledge about the situation in order to decide whether she was ready to protest. However, out of curiosity she went once with her father to observe the protest outside the Parliament (Althing).

Anna found the public protests important. 'I think it's very positive that people show that they care. I was actually very happy about it at first because I think it's quite unlike Icelanders; we don't protest that often'. At the same time she claimed that she was absolutely opposed to damaging the parliament building, to throwing eggs, or to violent behaviour against policemen; she felt people could not 'have an impact in that way'. She said that doing that damage had harmed the cause; she also feared that it had led to the generalization that all young people participating in the protest were also saboteurs. These behaviours clearly disturbed her; she felt that people blamed this violent behaviour on young people and accordingly was afraid that this meant that people would not listen to them as carefully.

Anna felt the influence of the public had changed after they started protesting: 'I think people are more ready to listen to the public and what the public wants'. She added, "as the protests were going well there might be less prejudice towards protesting ... Now people see that all kinds of people protest ... not only certain kinds of people'.

Already in the first interview Anna emphasized that young people, including herself, could have an influence within society. But to motivate young people to have an impact, schools should inform them about their opportunities to do so. In other words, she felt she and other young people could have an impact on society but the problem was that they were not informed about how they could do that. She felt it was particularly important that young people could have an influence in their schools both on their studies and their social lives.

Through both interviews she called for more knowledge and information: young people generally need ways to have an effect and she specifically needed more knowledge and information to be able to decide whether to participate in protests and how to prepare to be active in politics (e.g., in becoming a member of Parliament).

Magnus

Magnus's values became more clear in his second interview (February 2009) than in his first (summer 2008). He expressed both individual and collective values: the freedom and right to express his or her opinion (individual); and freedom and equal rights to have an influence, as well as solidarity (collective). After the economic crisis he wanted a 'direct democracy' where all people can have a voice and the public can vote on important matters. His words reflect the thinking that all people should have equal

rights or opportunities to have a say and influence the society. He was concerned that people expressed critical thinking. Also now he emphasized 'solidarity—unity': 'The protest wouldn't have been this influential if people had not shown such solidarity. You have to show solidarity, you have to join; it is the unity that matters.' And he connected this to how much of a victory it was when the old government collapsed: 'The public achieved this victory.'

Magnus clearly wants to have an influence on the society. In primary school he was already active in making decisions within his school and community (on the board of both student council and his community's youth council).

In the summer of 2008, in response to the question of whether he would take part in civic protests he said, '[If] something really matters and is a real problem, then I think it [is] a civic duty to go out and protest'. Having been very critical of the government in the first interview, not surprisingly Magnus took part in the public demonstrations following the economic crisis. His reason was: 'The only thing we can do is to protest.' And seven months later: 'I'm very unhappy with the situation and how it has been tolerated ... all these years'. As people protested 'there came this hope ... that's a big part of why I started to protest ... The hope is in the air ... All criteria and ways of thinking are changing in the society at the same time. There is a turning-point'. He did question, however, whether the Icelandic nation would keep up its spirit of protest in the future.

After the crisis, Magnus experienced changes in the influence that people have on society: 'I think people are more conscious about the fact that they can have an impact on society... It's really a mixture of hope and awareness'. Before the crisis he was not that optimistic that people would try to have a say even though they wanted to; to him they were being walked over by the government. But now he thinks that all people can have more influence, including young people and he himself. Before the crisis there was no 'case'; therefore young people had few opportunities to have an influence, but after the crisis the situation had touched everyone.

What do we learn from listening to Anna's and Magnus's voices?

Both Anna and Magnus find it important, at both an individual and a societal level, for people to have the opportunity to express their opinions; this includes all young people and the speakers themselves. And both urge that people listen to young people, emphasising that young people should have an influence within their society. With regard to being listened to and having a say, however, both felt it made a huge difference for them to have now attended secondary school. We notice that they share the democratic values of freedom and equal rights of people to have a voice.

Regarding protests, both are pleased about the public demonstrations. In the first interview before the crisis, both felt that members of the Icelandic public did not protest by expressing their opinions; nor did they stand up for their rights. In other words, they thought that the Icelandic public would not take part in protesting, as people were not used to doing so. Both emphasize that they want people to know why they are protesting; they should not protest just to protest. And both think the public has more influence now than before the economic crisis.

The main differences in their attitudes and views seems to be that before the crisis Anna was more optimistic than Magnus about the idea that she and young people could have a say in the society. After the crisis she had become less optimistic and related it to the 'image in society' of young people, as some of them had violated rules or damaged property during the protests. She was worried that politically, people would not listen as carefully to young people because of this behaviour and because of the generalization that all young people were engaged in sabotage. Magnus, on the other hand, did not seem concerned that this behaviour damaged the image of young people. He said it did not matter that property was damaged; these were just dead things that could be repaired. To him it mattered more that people expressed their views and claims about change. He did not himself participate in doing the damage and claimed, like Anna, that he was absolutely opposed to violence against policemen or employees in the parliament building because these people were only doing their jobs and had no choice about being there.

Further, Anna and Magnus differed in their political reactions. Anna did not take part in the demonstration but Magnus did. To both of them the issues had to be personally meaningful before they would participate. Even though Anna felt it was important that the public protest in order to have some

influence, she felt she needed more knowledge and information in order to do so. She felt she did not know enough about the effects of the economic crisis, as it had not affected her family that much. Magnus, on the other hand, felt ready to protest. Before the crisis we already heard his active voice criticising the government, and at that time he was already active politically, both within school and in his community, fighting for improvements in his community.

The similarities and differences in these young people's perspectives reflect what we would like to emphasise here: how important it is not only to explore young people's understanding of people's civic participation in general, but also how they personally make meaning of their own civic participation, i.e. what it means to them personally to participate in civic actions, or not to. Their perspectives on other people's participation in activities such as protest and their own participation can be different, as in Anna's case, and we must be aware of and respect those differences when we work with them.

Conclusion

With better understanding of young people's civic knowledge, civic values, and civic agency and actions, we should be able to work more constructively in promoting their civic awareness and engagement. One way to acquire a deeper understanding of their perspectives and voices is to interview them about citizenship and the influences people can have within their society and to analyse their responses by using the lenses presented in this chapter. Applying this approach should help us understand how youth develop their civic identity. Young people have a lot to say, and to teach us.

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